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SUBJECT: Niger: Food Insecurity Continues to Deepen

Ref: a) Niamey 813 b) Niamey 862 c) Niamey 948

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¶11. (SBU) Summary: Evidence continues to accumulate that Niger is facing a serious food insecurity crisis between now and the next potential harvest in September 2010. Reporting from the field continues to confirm poor, minimal, or no harvest in many villages. Pasturage is virtually non-existent in the pastoral zone. The Minister of Livestock and Animal Industry is asking for international donor assistance. It is fairly clear that there is a serious methodological flaw in the Government of Niger's (GON) harvest assessment. Famine Early Warning System (FEWS) is reporting increasing depth and breadth of high food insecurity. End summary.

Post-Harvest Assessment Methodology Seriously Flawed

¶12. (SBU) Ref B reported on the GON Ministry of Agricultural Development's pre-evaluation of the 2009/10 agricultural season and provisional results. Further discussions with experts and knowledgeable insiders reveal how truly "provisional" the results are. The report states that potential stalks of cereal grain are enumerated in August and September. This would be adequate in a season when rains are sufficient and continue until the end of September. In many parts of Niger they did not continue, and it is clear that many of these stalks counted in August did not mature in late September. These same experts suggest that the 2009 harvest easily could be below the three million metric ton mark, or less. This has not happened since 2004.

Cereal Production Likely Worst in Recent Years

¶13. (SBU) If the cereals production is three million metric tons, and the population is 15.29 million (per the Population Reference Bureau estimation for mid-2009), the total grain availability from

production would be 196 kg per person versus the 10-year average of 252 kg and very close to the 195 kg and 197 kg per person in 2004 and 2000, respectively. It is clear this meager harvest was very poorly distributed over Niger with significant numbers of villages having little or no production.

Pasturage Unusually Poor

¶4. (SBU) In Niger cereal harvest is only one of the many determinants of food security. FEWS data show that the pasturage deficit is near an all-time high with only 33 percent of the estimated requirement available after two bad years. Very little of this is in the pastoral zones. This in part explains the falling prices of animals versus cereals. Livestock constitutes an important constituent of livelihood security. The Minister of Livestock and Animal Industry, in a report published in the GON-owned daily newspaper "The Sahel," detailed the depth of the problems confronting the livestock sector and appealed to the international donors to assist Niger. General failure of the cowpea and groundnut crops will further deprive farmers of cash to buy cereal.

Survey in Six Districts Confirms Serious Problems

¶5. (SBU) After the early October field assessment, the Embassy Niamey Food for Peace Officer (FFPO) requested partnered NGOs to provide a rapid assessment of the food security situation in their districts (departments) of operation. In six districts of Dosso, Tahoua, and Zinder Regions (two each) surveys of 480 households in 48 villages conducted in October 2009 concluded that 67 percent of the households reported their harvest to be either bad or very bad. More than 77 percent reported three months or less of their food needs covered with 16 percent indicating no stocks at all. 30 percent of all households have already reduced food consumption from

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three meals a day to two and 16 percent of the total is only consuming one meal per day. 57 percent of the households report rationing food through reduced amounts being prepared for consumption. 70 percent report the animal fodder situation as poor.

(Comment: Although the limitations of the survey are recognized, it represents one more snapshot reflecting a very early deterioration of the current food security situation. Like the other information provided in this message, however, it does add to the total picture.

End comment.)

OFDA Confirms Alarming Deficits in Maradi, Elsewhere

¶6. (SBU) OFDA conducted an in-depth situation assessment in early November in the regions of Maradi, Zinder, and Diffa (ref C). One interesting highlight reported a regional official in Maradi willing to risk reporting that five of the seven districts in his region were experiencing "alarming deficits." A visit to one of the districts not reported as alarming produced a women's association indicating a harvest of only one month's supply of cereal. Maradi is not usually included in the regions reported as being at serious risk, as all of the attention seems to be on Zinder and Diffa.

FFP Team Visit Further Verifies Acute Stress

¶7. (SBU) The FFP team from USAID/Washington and USAID/WA Dakar, with USAID/Niger FFPO and Assistant FFPO, conducted an eight-day field trip to visit NGO partner MYAP (multi-year assistance programs) projects and simultaneously assess the food security situation. The FFP team visited 21 villages in seven districts in three regions. In all sites visited, the residents described a very poor harvest and very limited access to food. The team found that in Goure district of eastern Zinder region the harvest was no more than 10 percent of anticipated normal production.

UNOCHA Reports Poor Pasturage and Diffa Deficit

¶8. (SBU) The semi-monthly bulletin of UN OCHA reports serious deficit of pasturage in Diffa and Tahoua regions as well as a 90 percent cereal deficit in Diffa. The OCHA report notes that NGOs are responding with increasing support for cereal banks and cash for

work activities.

Latest FEWS Reporting Raises Level of Concern

¶ 19. (SBU) The FEWS Regional Food Security Alert of November 25 reports on the West Africa Region, but has a few noteworthy comments on Niger, including the observations that:

-- If Government policies restrict cereal flows, poor agriculturalists could face reduced cereal availability, high prices (2005 crises levels), and locally extreme food insecurity; and

-- From April, declining food stocks, rising cereal prices, and falling livestock prices will reduce household purchasing power and high food insecurity will spread to the poor in deficit agricultural households in Niger. (Comment: There are reasons to suggest these scenarios will unfold more rapidly than FEWS is currently predicting. End comment.)

Allen